

Historic cemetery lacks a caretaker | The Fresno Bee

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By Erik Lacayo / The Fresno Bee



ALLENSWORTH -- In the shadow of the state park here that has seen its share of attention this year sits a historic cemetery that languishes in neglect.

Some of Allensworth's founders are buried in it, but many of the graves are unmarked.

Worse, no one is taking responsibility for the 5-acre cemetery. Local and state officials point fingers at each other. Community members bravely say they'll do something, but lack the resources.

But now that advocates are done defending Allensworth against encroachment from two proposed mega-dairies, there is a renewed push to recognize the cemetery.

"I call it a dirty little secret about Allensworth," said Etha Jones of Oakland, a proponent of preserving history at Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park.

The cemetery sits 1 1/2 miles south of the park and the present community of Allensworth, whose founder, Col. Allen Allensworth, in 1908 created the state's only town to be governed and supported by blacks.

Black pioneers and Buffalo soldiers are buried in this cemetery; exactly how many is unknown.

No paved roads lead to this cemetery -- just a dusty, dirt path.

No walls mark the perimeter of this cemetery -- just a handful of metal poles that once supported a chain-link fence.

No manicured lawn comforts visitors to this cemetery -- just weeds and hard earth.

There are headstones that include wooden crosses and more modern concrete grave markers -- some of which are well-weathered and unreadable, while others appear to have been cracked under the tires of a tractor.

The deterioration can be traced to the cemetery's remote location and the ambiguity over who is responsible for its upkeep.

A Tulare County parcel map lists the Tulare Public Cemetery District as the owner of Allensworth Cemetery.

But county Supervisor Connie Conway said it's not part of any cemetery district in the county. Further, she said, the county itself isn't prepared to take care of a cemetery.

County spokesman Eric Coyne, answering criticism at a board meeting this month that supervisors were neglecting the cemetery, suggested that the town of Allensworth might be the owner. Coyne said last week that staff still was searching county archives for a document that would prove ownership.

State parks officials say it's not their responsibility.

Allensworth resident Nettie Morrison said she has been trying to get officials to pay attention to the cemetery for 30 years.

"For 100 years we've been neglected, so if they don't want to accept responsibility for it we'll step up to the plate," said Morrison, who represents the nearly 500 people who live in and around Allensworth.

"It's sad that it was ever allowed to get in this predicament," Morrison said.

"I never believed in cremation until I started seeing things like this."

Col. Allensworth, a former slave and Civil War veteran, is not buried at the town's cemetery but it serves as a final resting place for many of those who followed him.

When a portion of Allensworth became a state park in 1976, the cemetery was not included.

Ron Krueper, superintendent of the state park district that includes Allensworth, said the cemetery was left out because it's so far away from the historic center.

But now, some say the time is right to bring the cemetery into the light because of the attention the park has received during the past year.

This month, the state and Tulare County farmer Sam Etchegaray reached a celebrated \$3.5 million deal that saved Allensworth from having to be a neighbor to two large dairies, ending a debate that had raged in the state Capitol and captured national attention.

Conway said she will meet with Assembly Member Wilmer Amina Carter on Wednesday to discuss the cemetery.

Carter is the author of pending legislation that would create a 2.5-mile buffer around the park to prevent dairies from moving into the area. It is a bill that local officials said they oppose because it takes land-use decisions out of their hands.

But now that the Etchegaray deal is finalized, Conway said Carter's bill could be the right vehicle to get the cemetery into the state park.

If the state can spend \$3.5 million protecting Allensworth from dairies, she reasoned, it should be able to take on the cemetery as well.

Carter said she is willing to listen.

Adding support is Theodore Jackson Jr., deputy director for the California Department of Parks and Recreation, who said on a recent visit to Allensworth that it is logical that the cemetery be incorporated into the state park.

This isn't the first time that people have tried to help Allensworth Cemetery -- or run into obstacles.

In 2002, a California State University, Fresno, professor proposed using a "ground-penetrating radar" to find out exactly how many people are buried there and to map the property without disturbing the graves. But Roland Brady, who is now retired and living in Portland, Ore., said he couldn't get funding for his research.

"It's interesting from a cultural perspective," he said. "I think the time is right to get this thing going again."

Another Fresno State professor, anthropologist John Pryor, recently visited the site and plans to do more research there.

At least 45 people are known to be buried in the cemetery. They include Frank A. Smith, a Civil War veteran, and James and Alice Hackett, who taught classes in their home before a school was built in the town.

Morrison said **three people have been buried there in the last 15 years.**

The cemetery does get visitors once in a while. Morrison knows because some stop by her Allensworth home asking for directions. No signs in town point to the cemetery.

Morrison said she would like to see all the graves found and marked. She said she wants the cemetery to have trees and a bench.

And she also wants to be able to show off a gift made in 2003 by students at Redwood High School in Visalia. That gift, made for a restored cemetery, now sits in an office at the nearby state park.

It is a plaque with the profile of Col. Allensworth. It reads: "Dedicated to the pioneers buried here, some known only to God."